

**UNIVERSITY OF MASSACHUSETTS LOWELL  
CENTER FOR LOWELL HISTORY**

**CENTER FOR ASIAN AMERICAN STUDIES  
ORAL HISTORY PROJECT**

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**INTERVIEWER: MEHMED ALI  
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**J=JACKIE**

**A=ALI**

**K=KALE**

A: Okay. This is interview with Jacqueline Moloney on February 11, 2016. And thanks again Jackie for being here with us.

J: It's great to be here.

K: Okay. So I guess I'll just start with asking you about the Foundation, The Indochinese Refugee Foundation. Do you know how and why it was established in Lowell?

J: Yes. Actually the Founders of the Indochinese Self-Help Foundation, one of them was a member of the faculty here. His name was Hai Pho, and his wife's name was Lan Pho. And they were from Vietnam. And they had family in Vietnam during the fall of Vietnam, and were instrumental in trying to create a kind of what they called at the time, Mutual Assistance Associations to enable refugees who were fleeing from Southeast Asia to support each other in the U.S. So they were very involved in the Refugee Resettlement Movement and they created that Foundation to do that work.

K: Do you know what year that was?

J: What year they founded the Foundation? I'm trying to think of when I started working for them. So I would say, I could give you roughly the late seventies, but I don't have the actual date.

K: And when did you start working there?

J: About 79.

K: 79? (J: Umhm) Okay.

A: So you started right at the very beginning Jackie?

J: It was pretty close to the beginning. I was their second Executive Director.

A: Okay.

J: And the first one, I don't think she lasted that long. It was really hard work and there were a lot of cultural differences in the way that you know, even for me when I took on that job I had to make a lot of adjustments in the way that I thought about running a non-profit that surprised me in my first couple of weeks there. And it quickly became a labor of love for me. And I knew, and maybe because they had learned from the first director that they had, that it didn't work at all because she wanted to do things in a certain way and they knew that would not work with this refugee population, which honestly we can talk about in a minute, surprised me. I mean these were people who were being resettled in Lowell in very large numbers, very irresponsible way. They were being dropped in the city. The resettlement agency who was resettling them, it wasn't the Indochinese Self-Help Group, but there were different resettlement agencies across the country who were, they would be paid \$500.00 a person to resettle a refugee. Now in some places, you know, like in the Mid-West there were a lot of small towns. They would take that money in the church say, and help a family to resettle in you know, wherever, Idaho. So that was one model.

In a place like Lowell unfortunately there was a resettlement agency that would take many, many families, take their money and place them in very inadequate housing with no training, no ESL, no support services, you know, to the point where we were finding people. I would get calls from the hospital or police and say, "We just picked up this family. They have no shoes. They don't speak a word of English. It's the middle of winter. They're walking on Merrimack Street with no shoes on. What are you doing about that?" So we had to develop a pretty, you know large scale, very fast-responding mobilize the community to care for this group of refugees that were basically dumped in the city. And the city was not prepared for it. The schools were not prepared. The hospitals were not prepared. There were no translators, no interpreters anywhere.

And so that was, that was my first job. I rang the first round of interpreters in the city of Lowell providing ESL classes and then where we could you know, helping families to resettle and you know, distributing goods that we were collecting to the families themselves.

K: Those were the main services then?

J: Those were it, yah.

K: So during your time there, there was the Indochinese Self-Help Project, correct?

J: Yes.

K: So was that a separate function of the IRF?

J: So the IRF was broader than just Lowell. In fact a lot of their work was in Boston. So you know I honestly didn't have as much to do with them. They got funding, this Indochinese Refugees Foundation got funding to do the Self-Help Project from the Resettlement Agency.

K: So the Self-Help Project is what offered those services?

J: Yes.

K: Okay.

A: And the IRF was, the Headquarters was not based in Lowell?

J: Honestly the, I wonder if the (--) It was a Board. A lot of the members were from Boston and they would hold their meetings where we were housed, which was the International Institute. But they had other meetings that I didn't always go to all their meetings Mehmed. So they might have had some in Boston.

A: Okay.

J: So they were a broader base, more of the, I would say established, you know, well established. They weren't refugees. These were Southeast Asians who were well established who created this Foundation. You know, they would hold, I remember them holding fashion shows, fundraisers, but it was really to help build their own ethnic community until this crisis happened. And that's when they got funding to help intervene in the city of Lowell.

K: As Director what were your main duties with the Self-Help Project?

J: Well it was everything. The chief, cook and bottle washer. I mean there were really only I (--) ) There were probably six of us. And so one was to run the, set up and run the ESL Program and to get those refugees to the point where they could actually go into the Adult Education Program. So you think about Fred Abisi and Adult Education, which they were totally opened to helping these refugees, but they didn't have the resources either. They were not prepared for people who were you know, Laotian, Cambodian whose you know first language, the alphabet didn't even look like ours. I mean you come into Lowell now, it's so much more diverse and people coming from so many different countries, Lowell was really not prepared for this generation of refugees that came here. So we set up that first ESL class. That was a big deal. We did work with companies trying to get job placements. And then I had this whole group of interpreters. And their work was to go to the hospitals to you know, I mean there were battles

over everything going into the schools. There are a lot of cultural issues where you know, a woman would go into the birthing center at Lowell General, and Lowell General was not equipped to deal with the cultural traditions of these women coming from Cambodia, or from Laos. And the interpreters, I mean they could barely speak English you know. I remember my first Cambodian interpreter really barely, barely could speak English. And they were the most challenged community, because of course of the genocide that had happened. So there weren't a lot of educated Cambodian refugees who could even read and write.

So we had a lot of challenges to overcome. It certainly changed their way of looking, changed my way of looking at life for sure. You know the things that you take for granted, and dealing with people who were traumatized by the wars in their countries. You know the civil wars as well as the Vietnam War. And so there's a lot of suspicion that we had to overcome, a lot of worry about an agency. It took me a long time to earn the trust and respect of those people. And that was the biggest surprise for me to be honest. I just thought, well I'm here. I've got English language for you. I can help you find a job. You know, we might have some silverware for your kitchen. Why would you not welcome me into your home? Well trust me, they did not. It took me a long (--) But I really worked at it. And you know things like, and of course to add to it, at the time I was pregnant.

Well there are certain customs which were unbeknown to me. There's a whole hierarchy in their cultures of you know, gratefully teachers are very important in their culture, women was not. You know that I would go literally into the family home and the women would sit behind the men. And here I as a woman who was pregnant no less, we're pregnant and you were just supposed to stay home and not even go outdoors, and I'm this pregnant woman walking into their home trying to help them. And they would, some of them would take it like she's trying to tell me what to do. So I had to be very careful and very respectful, and really learn the protocol. Things like who goes out of the room first? That was my first confusing you know, cultural episode when you know, my first meeting I would just walk out the door. And then I realized I was really upsetting some of the elders and I learned how to gracefully bow out of the room, or let them go first. If they were the elder you always give them the respect. If they hand you something you take it with two hands. You don't just take it with one. So all of these small things to show them the respect coming from what they had come from was a big deal.

So it was everything you know. We had our first, the first death of that community. I remember we were about six months into this, so I was in pretty good shape with the community at that point. We had delivered a lot of food and silverware and done a lot of ESL, and gotten jobs and intervened in a lot of emergency room people calling, saying, "You've got to get someone down here. These people are all [unclear]." So we settled a lot of those kind of things. So we had great trust at that point from the community. And we had a death, and it was a young man I think he was probably 32, or 33. And there was a belief among the Lao Hmong people who were more, much more tribal, but they were a whole group of people in Laos that had been displaced because they had helped the CIA. So this was this whole group of people who were taken from their very tribal culture, ethnic culture, and dropped in the city. It's very, very difficult. And this young man died and they felt it was from his home sickness.

And they said that they would will themselves to death in a way, and that's how they felt this young man died.

Now of course here we go again. How do you bury him? They have all of these burial rituals. I can remember bringing in the funeral directors into the International Institute and the city health inspectors, and we had to meet and figure out how we were going to bury this young man and respect their cultures, because it was even more traumatic that he had died this way. And if we didn't bury him the right way his spirit would wander forever. So that was on everyone's head, but there were all these city rules about you know, you have to cremate the body first, not cremate it but what is it when you take the blood out of people? Do you know?

A: The embalming process?

J: Embalming. Yes, and when the embalming happened, that's what it was. Oh boy trying to resolve that! And to everyone's credit in this city, you know, when I really learned to love this city, because people figured it out and they made it work, and they made it right for that family. And that fellow was buried the right way. And everybody changed everything that they were doing to accommodate that. One small person's life, you know I don't think that would happen everywhere. I know it wouldn't. So it just, it really made me appreciate the compassion of the people in this city and their inclination to really welcome people from diverse backgrounds, and to try to find solutions rather than (--) I think in some cities they would have been so overwhelmed. They would have said (--) We see it happening now and I understand it, in cities in Europe where they're saying stop. We can't take any more of these refugees. You know, this is overwhelming our community. Well this community was overwhelmed but people stepped up. The school system stepped up. They hired teachers eventually. It took us some time, but you know it was a challenging time.

K: You're still working in Lowell here thirty years later. Do you think that working for the IRF had any impact on your decision to stay involved in the Lowell Community?

J: Oh absolutely. Like I said, it was a life altering experience for me. And I was only there a little over a year, but I never lost my tie with that community you know. It was just a phenomenal experience. And I just described to you how it just changed my view of this city and what the city is capable of doing, and has helped me to keep faith and focused. And having been involved now in a lot of non-profits like Lowell General Hospital, now I'm on the board, then I was taking people to the emergency room. Now I'm on the board. But I can tell you I know that Lowell General Hospital really honors the diversity of people that come there, and they're well cared for. Lowell Community Health is there for that reason. And I just, I still see how you know, this community embraced that community and really made it special for them. I remember (--) Who? There was a special thing every year. It was before the Farmer's Market in downtown, but they would have these monthly whatever it is, some show or something downtown Lowell, and they were so kind and reached out the Southeast Asian Community. And these people were hurting. You know they left their countries with nothing. So culturally like they didn't have many of their clothes or their instruments; they didn't even know who was

the singer from there, how to find a singer, or dance, or how to do the dance. So we were kind of coddling together the first Cambodian Dance Troupe.

K: That's wonderful.

J: And I remember them performing in JFK Center and it was just really hard to pull that off. I remember how hard they worked. And they're calling their friend in Connecticut and their friend in California. People are trying to ship stuff here. We were trying to coddle together enough little outfits for the women to do the dance, and you know the different instruments. And we coddled together that first group and there was such great pride in the community. And I think for them it was also just bringing their culture here and having it back and be part of who they were was very, very important for them. So it was nice to be a part of it.

A: Could you speak a little bit about the jobs program that the IRF had when you were there, if you remember any details? Do you remember any?

J: I don't. I know that we worked with a lot of companies and did entry level training. The ESL was big, but beyond that I don't really remember.

A: Okay.

J: Did you remember it?

A: Nope. I mean we found some of the companies in the photographs. Now I've forgotten. I don't know if you remember it.

K: Just kind of like linen work, or just working in like clothing factories, or anything like that. There are a lot of pictures of people working.

J: Yeah, and you know, so we would arrange the transportation. And what's funny to me is now when I drive home I drive down Westford Street where of course a lot of the Southeast Asians settled in the highlands. And you still see the buses, the vans going up that street and dropping workers off at different plants. So you know, again, the plants were great. Of course they loved these employees because they were very hard working.

K: So the building where you worked was 79 High Street, correct?

J: Yes, the International Institute.

K: What was that building like? Was it, is it still there? Is it, it changed right?

J: Well it's still there. It got sold to a private residence. The International Institute moved. I don't even know where they are now. Do they even have a place in Lowell?

A: Yes, because Derek Mitchell was in charge of it until recently.

J: Yes.

A: I think they're at 144 Merrimack Street.

J: Okay.

A: But the building itself, what was?

J: It was a big old house. It was, you know, the International Institute was downstairs, but it was perfect for us because they had a lot of space, actually classroom space. And there was an apartment in the building, and they needed someone to take care of it. So we had our first interpreter, the Cambodian interpreter who lived in the building. So it was great for them too. So it was great shelter. It was a great building. There was a big beautiful opened room. And I still remember the, on the cultural, what we had to overcome. You know, probably at this point we were four months, it was before that death, and many of the people had not seen a monk for a year or two and they were really desperate to see a monk. So we, they connected with friends and somewhere in Connecticut, they had some other group in Connecticut and the monk came. So we announced the monk. I felt like there must have been 250 people in this room where there should have been 100 people. And the same thing happened. And then I was standing there and now I'm eight months pregnant, and everyone in the room dropped to the floor in honor of the monk, you know the bow and hitting the floor and prostrating themselves. And I'm standing there and I'm thinking it's me and the monk. I don't know what to do. I'm not going to drop to the floor because I'll never get up. And you know it wasn't my religion. I wasn't disrespectful to him, but I didn't know what else to do. Nobody coached me on that one Kale. I didn't really know what to do. But we had a lot of moments like that, that were so special and people were just I mean crying and so happy to have a monk among them again. And to have their traditions back, and to be able to say their prayers, and it was very, very nice to be a part of that. So that building really lent itself to those meetings, a special place.

K: What were your reasons for leaving the IRF?

J: I was pregnant.

K: Yah, that's what I figured.

J: I just mentioned that, and I was having my second daughter. You know, I never intended to stay there. I didn't know what I was getting myself into when I took on that job. I probably wouldn't have done it if I had known, because I knew they needed a longer term solution. But I had hired a couple of people who were very involved as the teachers, and one of them in social work is Carol Keirstead who kind of took over.

K: She took over?

J: Yah. So that was great. It's amazing the way things happen, but it's funny they were very concerned when I was leaving. And I was in labor and they did not want me to leave. And you know, at this point my office would always have like fifteen, sixteen of the elder men because they decided everything as a community. And they would sit in my office every day and they'd you know, bring me all like ginger root. I was supposed to eat ginger root and this big (egg?). And Alise Martin was a teacher then too. Do you know Alise?

A: Yeah Alise.

K: Umhm.

J: Yah, that worked at Middlesex and she was pregnant too. It was just unusual. And they didn't want me to leave. And I'm like, "I have to leave. I'm in labor. I'm going. Bye, I'm leaving." And I got to the hospital and I had my daughter. And the nurse came in to me the next morning and said, "Excuse me Ms. Moloney, but you're going to have to help us. There are all these people out in the waiting room and they won't leave!" [All laugh] The same elders and their families out in the waiting room and they wanted to talk to me. They wanted to talk to me. I just had this little (--) I'm like we don't do that here. We're not going to talk, but I had to go talk to them and tell them I'm okay and I will come back. [Laughing] And you know, it was just again, because they knew at the hospital too what had been going on because I had been helping them with different patients that were being admitted there. So that's why I left.

K: So over your time there it seems like it became a lot easier, they warmed up to you. What do you think was the most important thing that you did in kind of helping build that relationship?

J: You know I'm a big believer as you know, maybe you've heard about my feelings about students is to empower people to have control over their lives. And I think that self-help project blossomed beautifully and it was because you know, having those elders in the room and helping them to build their own community, get their own temple, build their own dance groups, their own churches, you know, to take care of themselves and become their own leaders. I think that's what it was all about. [Repeats] That's what it was all about. And I believe that Lowell is a testament to how you do refugee resettlement correctly, because so many, that community is so strong here. They're such a strong part of this community and look at where the first Cambodian State Legislator in the country. I mean that is a lot to be proud of for this city. And I just, so when I look around me and most of the South Asians don't have any idea who I am, or what happened back then, it doesn't matter to me at all. It was an honor to be a part of it.

A: Two more questions Jackie.

J: Sure.



A: One, any stories about coworkers, colleagues, special people that were there with you during that time?

J: Absolutely. The interpreters were amazing. They were amazing people. And you know, they came, they were very different. We had a fellow who was a Vietnamese. He was a refugee in some ways, but he is a very well-educated man who had a wonderful family. So he wasn't coming out of poverty, didn't live in (--) He had a family to come to here. [Ja] Pho, he was Lan and Hai, he was Lan Pho's father.

A: Okay.

J: But he was such a gentleman. He didn't want to have any special treatment. So when I met him I didn't know he was Lan's father. He wanted me to treat him like any other interpreter, and he wasn't like any other interpreter. This was a very distinguished scholar, wonderful man, so well educated, and he just wanted to be you know, acted like the other interpreters. And of course it took us about a month, but gradually I let him know I really needed him to do more than be just (--) I needed advice. I needed guidance. And so he was very special. And the other interpreter [So Chet Urk] was a Cambodian interpreter. He's the one who really could barely speak English, had grown up as a farmer, but worked so hard to help his people. Just didn't sleep, didn't sleep. Twenty-four seven these people were on the road, they were on call and they were needed, and we needed them to do it. And their community needed them to do it. And you know, I know, I've met So Chet's son like as a student here at the University. And I hadn't been in touch with So Chet for twenty years. You know, and to see his son be a student here, that's a pretty special feeling. That's a pretty special feeling. They were great people.

K: So do you see any similarities in your job today as Chancellor as with working with for the IRF?

J: I do always, everything I've ever done in my career to me it's about building community, and a community that thinks about making the world a better place. So certainly in that sense yes. I think that that job really sensitized me to what it means to help people who are in trauma, who have been traumatized and who need really emergency, immediate, deep care. And but the biggest part of that is that it has to be done with respect. So I feel like, you know, certainly at the university we have students who come here who are in that situation, who need that help. As a community I feel like my greatest pride in UMass Lowell is that we are certainly, you know, it goes without saying we're an excellent academic institution, right? We are excellent in research that we do. We provide excellent academic programs. But I think what gives me the greatest pride (--) My greatest pride is that we're a compassionate community. We are compassionate to each other. Students, every day, every day I hear a story of students helping other students. That gives me great pride. Every day I hear about our staff. Somebody, you know, their child has cancer, or they've gone through a divorce, or they lost a parent, or whatever happened, people reach across and help each other here. And that is what I think

makes this place so unique and so special, and so extraordinary. So you know, to the extent that I brought some of that because of that experience, all to the good.

A: Well thank you Jackie very much.

K: That you so much.

M: That helpful I hope?

K: Yah it was.

A: Wonderful.

M: Good. Good. A special group.

**Interview ends**  
**jw**